

MEASURE 90 STIRS CONCERNS FOR BIG-MONEY INFLUENCE

A recent poll by Oregon Public Broadcasting shows support for the “top-two primary” initiative Measure 90 at 36 percent, opposition at 38 percent and undecided at 26 percent. If you are among the undecided, here’s a story for you.

Measure 90 would open Oregon’s primary elections to every registered voter. All voters would get ballots in May and pick their favorite candidate in each race, regardless of party. The two leading candidates would advance to the November ballot. Any combination of Democrats, Republicans or minority candidates could end up as the only choices in November. A similar measure in 1988 was defeated by a margin of 66-33.

The pro and con campaigns are both predicting big changes in how Oregon elects its representatives in state and federal races, but questions remain about what will actually happen if it passes. California and Washington passed similar measures in the last election cycles with inconclusive results so far. Oregon’s version of a “top-two” primary is different in significant ways, such as allowing candidates to list minor party endorsements right on the ballot.

Opponents say the top-two system would encourage big donors to try to buy elections by eliminating opposition, particularly when there’s no popular incumbent in the race. For example, when Rep. Peter DeFazio retires, big conservative donors could strategically back several Republican candidates so that no Democrat ends up on the November ballot.



‘Greens, Libertarians, Constitution Party or Working Family Party candidates would never make it to the November election.’

—MICHAEL BEILSTEIN, PACIFIC GREEN PARTY CANDIDATE

Big money, about \$4.5 million at last count, is flowing into the pro-Measure 90 campaign from conservative business and industry interests, leading to speculation. Stephan Michael, state director of The Main Street Alliance of Oregon, asks, “Why would out-of-state billionaires spend millions supporting this campaign? Good question. Perhaps it’s because of what they can get out of a victory.”

Sara Logue of the Protect Our Vote Coalition says the measure “essentially guarantees the two best-funded candidates would reach Oregonians’ November ballot.”

Some 650,000 independent and minor party voters out of two million voters are left out of primary partisan voting in our current system, but looking at California’s experience so far, it’s questionable whether independent and minor party voters will actually turn out in the primary. Minor parties will no longer have a reason to organize nominating conventions, and some minor parties will likely not endorse mainstream candidates, viewing that as diluting their message.

Measure 90 provides voters with more choices in the primary but that is offset by fewer choices in the general election when it really counts.

Opponents argue the real power for minor parties is actually having their names and candidates on the November ballot for everyone to see. Minor parties would disappear from ballots under Measure 90 unless they are able to win one of the top two positions, unlikely in Oregon. Michael Beilstein, Pacific Green Party candidate for Congress, says “Greens, Libertarians, Constitution Party or Working Family Party candidates would never make it to the November election.”

Will mainstream candidates become more centrist in a top-two primary, since they will need to appeal to all voters and not just their base? Extreme partisanship is likely to continue until we reform campaign finance laws and come up with a better way to reform our election process.

More information can be found at several websites, including noonmeasure90.org and 90fororegon.org. — Ted Taylor




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